

Building a Partnership between the United States and India

Exploring Airpower's Potential

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Relations between the United States and India have expanded in the nature, content, and depth of the countries' partnership over the last decade. Highlighting the importance of these relations, President Barack Obama during his visit to India in November

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE APR 2015		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2015 to 00-00-2015	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Building a Partnership between the United States and India: Exploring Airpower's Potential				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Air Force Research Institute (AFRI), Air and Space Power Journal, 155 N. Twining Street, Maxwell AFB, AL, 36112				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 19	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

2010 described relations with India as “one of the defining and indispensable partnerships of the 21st century.”¹ Manmohan Singh, the Indian prime minister at that time, echoed similar sentiments when he said that India had “decided to accelerate the deepening of our ties and to work as equal partners in a strategic relationship that will positively and decisively influence world peace, stability and progress.”²

Bilateral relations are important on their own; however, Prime Minister Singh emphasized “a shared vision of security, stability and prosperity in Asia based on an open and inclusive regional architecture” that both India and the United States share as the apex of the relationship.³ Therefore, if this partnership is as important as the two leaders seem to suggest, a greater strategic synergy is needed. One way of attaining it is through improved military-to-military relations. That is, as the two countries better understand and appreciate each other, they can work jointly for the greater good of the region and beyond.

This article suggests that a greater focus on the development of “air-power diplomacy” by both the US Air Force (USAF) and the Indian Air Force (IAF) as a strategic and operational capability integrated into the mission set of both services could mitigate conflict, preserve USAF and IAF assets during a time of tight budgets, and further the interests of both nations in the Asia-Pacific. As we define *airpower diplomacy*, it is a proactive approach to preventing and deterring conflict, building partnerships, and defending national interests by employing airpower in nonkinetic operations as an instrument of national power. Such an approach to the use of airpower may be particularly relevant to the United States as it seeks to pivot to a region where alliances in the style of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are unlikely and where the citizenry of many potential partners is sceptical of American intentions in the region. This article explains why a joint US-India airpower diplomacy strategy is a relevant objective and offers some thoughts on such a strategy’s ends, ways, and means.

Setting the Strategic Context and Rationale

With Asia in the midst of a major shift in the balance of power as China rises rapidly, the impact of the Chinese on the Asian strategic framework has become a major driver for greater cooperation between India and the United States. If those countries are to be successful, though, they need greater coordination and synergy in terms of both policies and approaches. US-India military engagements have been growing since the 1990s, but they have primarily remained dominated by their navies. On the one hand, the manner in which both of those services were able to coordinate and respond to the 2005 Christmas tsunami and subsequent reconstruction programs is a testimony to their level of cooperation. On the other hand, the two air forces have done their part in annual exercises and training but have not been able to effectively sell the critical importance of their cooperation from a strategic perspective. It is important for both the air force and the political leadership to understand and appreciate their soft-power roles if they are to play a meaningful part in building regional peace and stability.

In broader terms, both India and the United States have to be realistic about the shifting balance of power in Asia and beyond. Also, as India's political and strategic landscape changes, with its influence spreading beyond South Asia, it must remain mindful of the implications of that power dynamic. Few issues are as pertinent as India takes on a more important role in the emerging Asian strategic order. If India is unwilling to play the role of a junior partner in a China-centric Asia, then it has to ensure continued "American primacy," which has guaranteed peace and stability in Asia and beyond for several decades.⁴ One of the overriding factors of concern is that India's unwillingness to see an Asia dominated by one power would mean that New Delhi is left with balancing China as a more acceptable option. However, the power differential between India and China today does not present India with many choices for intraregional balancing because significant expenditures would be necessary to match Chinese military capability. Conse-

quently, external balancing is the most feasible option, at least in the near to midterm. India has not been forthcoming in displaying its options despite its inability to balance China on its own. However, this situation is likely to change over the next decade, if not earlier. Very likely, India's interests as well as the lack of full-scale capacity to deal with these issues on its own will move India closer to the United States and other Asian partners, including Japan and Australia.

Even as the two countries speak different languages in reaching the same strategic ends, they face common threats. Thus, it might prove beneficial to share information more frequently about the evolving force ratio and thereafter develop appropriate measures in a more coordinated and coherent manner. As for the common challenges, threats to India's northeastern region are quite similar to the ones that the United States confronts in the Western Pacific, including advanced integrated air defense systems, advanced fighters, and increasingly sophisticated electronic warfare capabilities. These common issues suggest that both countries, particularly their militaries, should talk to each other more often, learn from each other's experience, and develop more coordinated and coherent approaches as a means of ensuring regional stability.

Why should India choose the United States? Looking at the international hierarchy of power, New Delhi must realize that Washington will continue to be a central player in Asia for the foreseeable future. India would do well to see the positive attributes of a closer strategic partnership between New Delhi and Washington—encouraging the military-to-military relationships that lie at the heart of the airpower diplomacy strategy proposed here. In reality, as both India and the United States make efforts at crafting sophisticated strategies to deal with Asian uncertainties, neither can afford to distance itself from the other. The fluidity of the situation in Asia is such that both have to effect a policy of cooperation in order to ensure stability. Doing so calls for greater synergies in their foreign-policy orientations with all the major powers, particularly Japan, Australia, and Russia. The role of

small and middle powers such as Vietnam, Taiwan, and South Korea is equally significant in stabilizing the Asian continent.

Context for Promoting Airpower Diplomacy

Generally associated with the pursuit of peaceful relations between states, diplomacy nevertheless comes in many forms. Although somewhat of an arbitrary distinction, diplomacy can be divided into two broad groups—incentive based and threat based—with more than a dozen specific types of diplomacy falling within these broader groupings. On the one hand, incentive-based diplomacy relies on soft power and the carrot. It succeeds when states engaged in diplomacy reach an agreement that serves the interests of all parties. On the other hand, threat-based diplomacy is coercive in nature, employing means such as the threatened use of force or sanctions. The use of incentive-based diplomacy (traditional, commercial, conference, public, preventive, resource, and humanitarian) is increasing as the Obama administration shifts away from a grand strategy centrally focused on the use of hard power.⁵ This movement in policy will give the USAF an opportunity to play a greater role in the conduct of soft power or, more specifically, incentive-based diplomacy.

Although many American Airmen may dismiss the notion of the USAF conducting diplomacy at a time when it seeks to retire the A-10, stand-down flying units, and cut or terminate acquisition programs, there is a pragmatic benefit to convincing Congress of Airmen's ability not only to drop bombs and destroy targets but also to win friends and influence people with those same assets. In many respects, airpower diplomacy highlights the capabilities of airpower at the opposite end of the spectrum where we usually direct our efforts.

Logic of Airpower in the United States-India Context

Viewing the present and future Asia-Pacific security environment as analogous to the post-World War II period would be a mistake. NATO

has been successful at keeping the peace in Europe for more than half a century, but no such organization exists in the Asia-Pacific—nor is a multilateral security organization likely in the near future. The ties that bind NATO members demand a system of formal alliances and cooperation that many national leaders in the Asia-Pacific are unwilling to entertain.⁶ They are, however, open to pursuing their shared interests when opportunities arise. One such means available to the United States and India is airpower diplomacy—a capability ideally suited for conditions in the region. Airpower diplomacy as we define it (see above) can be critical in supporting Indian and American foreign policy objectives without resulting in major anxieties and disruptions.

At a time when fiscal pressures are unlikely to dissipate in the next decade and when the number of conventional and nonconventional challenges is increasing, it is incumbent upon both the Indian and American leadership to find cost-effective, nonkinetic means of defending their interests in the Asia-Pacific and in the larger global context. Airpower diplomacy offers India and the United States an opportunity to do just that. It also provides two additional benefits not found elsewhere: it reduces the need for a large military footprint to maintain relationships, and it offers a level of speed and flexibility that cannot be replicated elsewhere within the government. Further explanation is instructive. Simply stated, airpower diplomacy is a means of defending vital national interests, building necessary partnerships, preventing conflict, and expanding Indian and American influence without creating the anti-American or anti-Indian sentiment that often accompanies boots on the ground.

Speed, Flexibility, and Footprint

Airpower diplomacy will grow in importance for another reason. Other forms of military soft power do not have the advantages of speed, flexibility, and a limited footprint. These attributes are attractive for obvious reasons, but they are also appealing to decision makers in the current political environment. With the US military withdrawn

from Iraq and exiting Afghanistan—all while the United States pivots to the Asia-Pacific—the invade, occupy, and rebuild grand strategy of the early 2000s is proving increasingly less appealing to the American public.⁷ The hard-power concentration on Afghanistan and Iraq not only was costly in blood and treasure but also required a US presence that cannot be replicated across Asia. As President Obama looks for a better way to build successful partnerships—a core function of the USAF—airpower diplomacy may prove an attractive choice. For India the challenges associated with a rising China and its more muscular and aggressive military posture complicate the regional stability question, making it imperative to work in partnership with the United States.

Practicing US-India airpower diplomacy deliberately and coherently could effectively leverage the two air forces' capabilities in the interests of both nations and Asian stability. Although the IAF and USAF prepare—in peacetime—to fight and win their respective nation's wars, preventing war is equally desirable. Airpower diplomacy is a primary contributor to that mission.

USAF-IAF Partnership in Pursuing Airpower Diplomacy

A rising India, like other countries, has multiple foreign-policy tools available to pursue its national interests. For an India whose power differential with China is significant, it should be careful when it demonstrates its limited capability. By doing so, it would avoid provoking Chinese angst and worsening the situation for New Delhi and the region. That is, India should not demonstrate military power projection in ways that would invoke strong regional responses. Partnering with the USAF to conduct soft-power missions can have the strategic effects desired without the negative consequences that a more aggressive approach would risk. Joining the United States in any number of passive military and nonmilitary operations that include observation flights of the sea lines of commerce and communication, disaster response, and humanitarian missions could prove critical. These options can project

India's military power without necessarily upping the ante. Given the IAF's budgetary constraints, such missions are possible for the IAF and would be well received by the United States, which wishes to expand its partnerships across the region. America is interested in finding regional partners that may shoulder some of the security burden—an important contextualizing factor that strengthens the attractiveness of a US-India airpower diplomacy partnership.

Although China may be a central factor driving American and Indian behavior, such concerns cannot be expressed overtly, as is suggested by Indian rhetoric. This may be so because China is a powerful and immediate neighbor that will have to be dealt with in a more nuanced manner than is necessary for the United States. However, America has had its share of problems with China. Despite intertwined economies, Washington is careful to avoid facing the wrath of China unnecessarily. In the India-China-US context, the United States has not yet had to take a stand on the India-China border and territorial problems. A conflict, even a limited one, would force America to take sides—a choice that may be far more complicated than what is understood, at least on the surface. Therefore, for both India and the United States, the optimal course is to pursue closer military-to-military ties without necessarily provoking adverse reactions from China. Airpower diplomacy provides an ideal opportunity to do that while highlighting the soft-power aspects of airpower.

Given the complexities of an uncertain Asia, India and the United States need to tread carefully as they consider soft power as a viable means of cooperation. Some of the relatively noncontroversial forms of airpower diplomacy could include humanitarian, coercive, traditional, and commercial diplomacy.

Humanitarian diplomacy. America and India can strengthen their cooperation in the area of humanitarian diplomacy without creating much controversy. Given that the Asia-Pacific region is prone to a variety of natural disasters fairly frequently, and in the absence of adequate capacities at a regional level, countries in the region have had to bear

the brunt of disasters. Thus, for humanitarian operations, airpower diplomacy should be pursued with great vigor. In the wake of the 2005 tsunami, India and the United States were able to respond with immediacy because their two militaries had more than a decade of experience with joint exercises and training. However, US-India military cooperation is primarily driven by the two navies, a fact that became evident in the wake of the post-tsunami reconstruction efforts.⁸ This collaboration could be expanded to the sphere of airpower, a domain that will be of particular significance in future military operations. Civil-military cooperation (with active participation of civil and military bureaucracies) in disaster response and reconstruction efforts should become a driving force of humanitarian diplomacy.

Several recent examples of the USAF's participation in humanitarian diplomacy include operations Provide Hope (1992–94), Provide Promise (1992–96), and Support Hope (1994).⁹ Furthermore, when a 7.9-magnitude earthquake struck a remote area in Sichuan Province, China (12 May 2008), two USAF C-17s deployed from the United States with desperately needed relief supplies, arriving within a week.¹⁰ One final example is instructive. Joint Task Force Port Opening provided relief to victims of the 2010 Haitian earthquake—serving as a temporary communications node in a country whose communications infrastructure was destroyed.¹¹ Because of its ability to deploy rapidly to locations around the world, the USAF is undoubtedly America's best tool for supplying immediate assistance. These low-cost missions are also an excellent way to build goodwill with governments and citizens around the world—a key capability in the Asia-Pacific, where formal alliances are far less prevalent and personal relationships are far more important.

Similarly, though usually under a United Nations aegis, the IAF has supported many humanitarian operations, including those in assistance of UN missions in Somalia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and the Congo.¹² The IAF also undertook one humanitarian mission in its neighborhood when it dropped food over the northern Sri Lankan town of Jaffna when it was besieged by Sri Lankan forces fighting a Tamil rebellion.

This operation, however, could also be seen as force projection rather than a pure humanitarian mission.¹³

Coercive diplomacy. The coming years could also see India and the United States cooperate in coercive diplomacy. Potential hot spots in Asia include North Korea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea, among others. By working to shape and affect the circumstances and situations in these zones of uncertainty without the actual deployment of military forces, India and America could significantly improve regional stability. So far, resource diplomacy has not been explored in the Asia-Pacific context although it has the potential to emerge as an area of cooperation. This is particularly true of the South China Sea, where China is taking an aggressive position in the area, in part because of the large hydrocarbon deposits believed to lie beneath the sea floor.¹⁴ The United States and India have a shared interest in working out safe sea lines of commerce and communications, given the importance of securing energy interests as well as important trade corridors.

Traditional diplomacy. Airpower diplomacy in the form of military interactions also has the appeal of soft power in the air domain. Most of the current efforts fall within the “train, advise, and equip” category. India does not participate in any Inter-American Air Forces Academy type of program, but the number of Indian pilots participating in USAF training programs has grown from 6 in 2006 to 93 in fiscal year 2010. Also in 2010, 170 IAF members participated in non-professional military education (PME) training programs with the USAF. PME is in fact one area in which India and the United States have a growing partnership. The IAF currently sends one officer per year to the USAF’s Air Command and Staff College and one to the Air War College. In 2011 that service sent its first officer to the School of Advanced Air and Space Studies. Similarly, the USAF sends a colonel to the Indian Defense College every fourth year and an officer to the Defense Service Staff College every other year. The USAF also sent its first Council on Foreign Relations Fellow to India in 2009.

More traditional high-level visits between senior airmen are also increasing as the United States and India strengthen their partnership. Exercises such as Cope India 2002, Red Flag 2008, the Building Partnership Seminar (2009), and a dozen such others build trust between air forces and countries that were once (and often) at odds with one another.¹⁵ Given the convergence of interests, much more is possible in the years ahead.

Commercial diplomacy. Although the sale of weapons systems to foreign governments—through an embassy’s office of defense cooperation—often receives much attention, this example of commercial/military diplomacy is limited in scope.¹⁶ However, this is one area in which the United States and India are expanding their relationship.¹⁷ Over the years, India has made significant shifts in its procurement policy (although unstated) to diversify and thus move away from Russia toward the United States, Israel, and France, among others. Marking this shift, India’s major purchases from America include LM2500 marine turbines to power warships, C-130J Super Hercules aircraft, C-17 Globemaster III heavy cargo aircraft, and P-8I Poseidon long-range maritime reconnaissance and antisubmarine warfare aircraft. Additionally, the two sides are in dialogue to finalize deals for AH-64 Apache attack helicopters, CH-47 Chinook heavy-lift helicopters, and M-777 lightweight howitzers.¹⁸ The acquisition of the American C-17 Globemaster III in particular has been significant in the US-India context. The possession of one of the world’s largest cargo planes, able to airlift troops and deliver substantial amounts of humanitarian supplies, has a particular relevance in executing several forms of airpower diplomacy, including humanitarian diplomacy and assistance in peacekeeping operations.

Challenges

Despite significant progress over the years in implementing the different facets of airpower diplomacy in the US-India context, drawbacks have occurred as well. India’s decision on the procurement of medium multirole combat aircraft (MMRCA) is one such case in point (a deal

not yet concluded, even after selection of the French Rafale). Eliminating the American companies early on and finally narrowing their choices to the French Rafale and the Eurofighter Typhoon options were naive decisions made by Indian political leaders. Basing the decision on technical parameters alone was a strategic blunder.¹⁹ An agreement as high-profile as this could have been used to send a political message to India's friends and foes alike.²⁰ In addition, an American fighter aircraft in India's inventory could have proved strategically significant. India's major adversaries to the east and west would have thought seriously before venturing into a conflict had New Delhi decided differently.

Despite the adverse MMRCA decision and given that the deal with France has not been concluded, the United States showed interest in selling the F-35—the Joint Strike Fighter—to India. In 2011 Robert Scher, deputy assistant secretary of defense for South Asia at that time, remarked, “The F-35 is something that we would be more than willing to talk to the government of India about should they request to find out more information about purchasing it.”²¹ The aircraft is one of the most expensive and sophisticated systems ever developed under select international partnership with American allies. India has not shown any interest, citing cost as a major issue. However, the radar-evading nature of the F-35 may be sought after at a later stage, particularly if India does not make much headway in its indigenous stealth aircraft program. Sale of the F-35 came up two years later, again with no decision taken although it reflects strong US interest and desire to deepen ties with India.²² The new government has not yet made a statement on this matter although murmurs in the last few years suggest that India may drop the Rafale and choose the F-35 option. Such a decision could come in 2015.

Of additional concern is the fact that a few recent agreements have come in the way of strengthened bilateral defense relations. India's hesitancy to sign the Logistics Support Agreement—the India-specific

version of the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement, currently in negotiation—has also been a hurdle.

Regardless of such issues, India and the United States are already practicing airpower diplomacy. However, the need to institutionalize these efforts cannot be overemphasised. Given the multiple challenges facing Asia and the shifting balance of power, Indian use of soft power is increasingly important. Thus, the opportunity to engage in regional airpower diplomacy with the United States is an option that should be pursued further.

The Ends, Ways, and Means of an Airpower Diplomacy Strategy

Using the previous examples and conceptual discussion to underpin an airpower diplomacy strategy requires concentrated thinking. If predictions of the future fiscal, political, and security environment are correct, then development of an airpower diplomacy strategy is worth the effort for the United States and India. Examining its evolution in terms of ends, ways, and means offers a useful framework.

Ends

The objectives of an American airpower diplomacy strategy focused on India should address three central tenets. First, the strategy should develop cost-effective approaches to building and maintaining partnerships with that country. Although India is unlikely to enter into a formal security arrangement that resembles the North Atlantic Treaty (1949), less formal agreements can build a formidable partnership between the IAF and the USAF. Second, the strategy should develop proactive approaches to engaging with India for the specific purpose of cultivating a partnership that can temper the ambitions of China or a rogue regime in the region—although not limited to this end by any means.²³ India and the United States will not always agree on national strategy, but airpower diplomacy can remain a method of first resort for im-

proving Indo-American relations. Third, the strategy should consolidate the disparate diplomatic capabilities from across the USAF. At present, both the Indian and American air forces conduct numerous airpower diplomacy missions—great and small—but do not leverage them for their own and for India's and America's long-term benefit. Despite considerable efforts by the US Office of the Undersecretary of the Air Force for International Affairs (SAF/IA) to formulate a service strategy for building partnerships, further efforts are necessary. India as well should institute such mechanisms to formulate more coherent policies for cooperation.

Ways

The methods that the organization uses to achieve those ends are perhaps more difficult to develop than are the ends.²⁴ Although the following list is incomplete, the recommendations may offer a starting point for discussion of those “ways” for an airpower diplomacy strategy that assists in bringing the IAF and USAF together as their respective countries pursue strategies for a stable region.

First, for the United States, the plethora of departmental and service guidance found in the Theater Security Cooperation Strategy, Department of Defense Report on Strategic Communication, Air Force Global Partnership Strategy, Core Function Master Plan, and individual instructions, plans, and approaches could be consolidated and simplified into one document that facilitates creating a strategy that targets a specific country (India) while incorporating the range of airpower diplomacy activities.²⁵ Admittedly, SAF/IA and its regional affairs specialists do much of this already. The USAF has the benefit of starting from a firm foundation of experience and conceptual understanding. Harmonizing and simplifying competing interests and responsibilities, however, may prove difficult.

Second, clearly elaborating where airpower diplomacy begins and ends will go a long way toward winning support for such a strategy, both at home and in India. Just as other foreign policy tools have

strengths and weaknesses, so does airpower diplomacy. Having a clear way to determine when it is succeeding or failing is important. The ability to measure (e.g., progress, success, and failure) is particularly important in justifying expenditures during tough fiscal times.

Third, an airpower diplomacy strategy should provide a clear component specifying the who, what, when, where, why, and how that the USAF, combatant commands, Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), and Indian partners can all understand. When the Goldwater-Nichols Act (1986) reorganized the Department of Defense, it left the services responsible for organizing, training, and equipping forces while moving much of the “strategy” development into the OSD—making the combatant commands the war fighters. This approach makes it difficult for the services to develop and employ a strategy. Such an organizational weakness is difficult to overcome, but the Air Force must do so in order to present the combatant commander—of US Pacific Command in the case of India—with forces prepared to conduct a range of airpower diplomacy missions in conjunction with IAF partners. In light of airpower’s (air, space, and cyber) ability to perform hard- and soft-power missions with equal success, the employment of force (systems and personnel) deserves significant consideration since commanders are unlikely to support retasking a shrinking force to perform soft-power missions.

Fourth, the USAF should actively promote airpower diplomacy as an alternative approach within American foreign policy—especially true in the case of India and many other Asia-Pacific nations where, as previously stated, formal alliances are less attractive. Seamlessly transitioning from a hard-power-focused strategy (Afghanistan and Iraq) to a soft-power approach (airpower diplomacy) will have great appeal over the next several years. As the Obama administration looks for a distinct alternative to the present strategy, the time is right to offer an airpower diplomacy strategy.

Means

Thought of by many people as the operational element, the means of an airpower diplomacy strategy are less than straightforward. An examination of the USAF's *Building Partnership Core Function Master Plan (BPCFMP)* illustrates why. Ownership of the approximately 60 programs that fall under the *BPCFMP* is widely dispersed across the Air Force. This situation makes coordination of assets difficult not only because of the complex chain of ownership that exists but also because the commands that own these dual-capable systems and personnel often view soft-power missions as lying outside their core mission. For the IAF—which is attempting to understand American motivation and objectives, partly through reading unclassified government publications—the result can be confusion because of the lack of clarity.

Although SAF/IA, Air Education and Training Command, Headquarters Air Force A8 (Strategic Plans and Programs), and the Air Force's major commands all collaborate on the development of the *BPCFMP* and strategic documents (e.g., Air Force Global Partnership Strategy), it is not possible to say that a consensus supports the use of airpower assets for airpower diplomacy missions. Thus, the means to carry out an airpower diplomacy strategy are often employed in other operations. Elevating the significance of airpower diplomacy within the strategic planning process would make it possible not only to develop an airpower diplomacy strategy for India, for example, but also acquire the necessary resources to carry out the mission.

Conclusion

In the end, the wide range of soft-power missions regularly performed by airmen makes airpower an attractive option for building partnerships, assuring allies, and dissuading enemies. Developing an airpower diplomacy strategy that strengthens the relationship between India and the United States is in the interest of both nations and constitutes a positive step toward promoting stability in the Asia-Pacific.

The IAF and the USAF must always remain capable of fighting and winning India's and America's wars, but hard power should not serve as either country's means of first resort. Airpower diplomacy is a soft-power capability having sufficient force behind it such that other nations view it as more than just empty words. As defense spending faces prolonged pressure, innovative approaches to defending the national interest can and will prove attractive. Airpower is such an option. For India, the value of soft balancing against China makes joining the United States an increasingly compelling choice. ★

Notes

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